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It's Not The First China-Taiwan Presidential Meeting That Counts

Taiwan's president wants to meet his equivalent from China and the two sides are scoping out venues. The historical first this year or next would advance relations that have gone from threats of war to a cautious friendship since 2008 with landmark [ministerial-level talks](#) in February. But Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou says he's unready discuss politics with China, which wants control over his self-ruled island. Chinese counterpart [Xi Jinping](#) says politics must eventually be discussed.

Then what would they talk about in the discotheque-like blast of news camera flashes? My forecast: They will meet for history's sake with a tacit agreement to let Ma's successors do the heavy talking after he leaves office in 2016 due to term limits.



Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Ma and Xi will shake hands. They will avoid using each other's executive-branch titles (neither side recognizes the other as a president) but may call each other "party chief." Ma heads the Nationalist Party and Xi the Communist Party – the same two that fought a civil war in the 1940s when Ma's side fled China and set up a rival government in Taiwan. Then they might attempt a hokey joke followed by a platitude or two about how the two sides should cooperate more as fellow ethnic Chinese territories.

Ma wants to be remembered for breaking the ice with China after his first election in 2008, when he set aside the Taiwan sovereignty dispute to kick off talks on trade, transit and investment. Meeting his Beijing counterpart will consolidate that place in history. Xi would meet to add support for measures the Nationalist Party's has taken to build trust with China as the island's voters consider whether to return that party to the presidential office. They could go instead with the Democratic Progressive Party, which takes a more [guarded approach to relations with Beijing](#).

"Ma will do it to secure his legacy as the man who brought about détente between the two sides," says Sean King, senior vice president with consulting firm Park [Strategies](#) in New York. "Xi will do it to lock in whatever he can before Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party perhaps comes back into power in 2016."

Stay tuned for substance later. Ma's party would fall hard in opinion polls at home if he went back on his word to shun political dialogue without a broad mandate from the public. A lot of Taiwanese worry that China will eventually exploit today's détente to take over Taiwan, and they oppose getting too cozy with Beijing. But Ma's successors could leverage the presidential meet-up to

tap right into Beijing's power elite later when they want to talk politics, which Beijing will be eager to do. On the agenda: a stronger role in international agencies, such as the United Nations, that are controlled by China's allies, and possibly a peace accord to defuse the lingering threat of war. Any agreements at that level would be authoritative and far-reaching.

"The impact on cross-Strait relations could be quite significant," says Bonnie Glaser, senior fellow with the CSIS Freeman Chair in China studies. A presidential meet-up, she says, "could pave the way for resolving some issues."

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